



Indiana State Department of Health

Epidemiology Resource Center

Quick Facts

About...Hansen's Disease (Leprosy)

What is Hansen's disease (HD)?

HD is commonly known as leprosy. This condition involves the body's immune response to the bacteria and affects the skin, eyes, throat, mouth, and the nerves, affecting muscle tone. Skin nodules or plaques will develop. If left untreated, permanent disfigurement and disability can occur. Cases of HD are well-documented in history, and cases still continue to exist today.

What are the symptoms of HD?

Symptoms of HD include a rash, which appears as light reddish or pale colored patches on the trunk or hands and feet. These skin patches get larger and do not go away despite medical treatment and may appear as nodules. Another early symptom of the disease is a loss of feeling or weakness in the fingers and toes. Nasal congestion is also a common sign of the condition. Symptoms of HD typically do not appear until many years after exposure to an infected person.

How is HD spread?

The bacteria which cause HD are thought to be spread through repeated contact with respiratory droplets of an infected person over a long period of time. Almost 95% of the world's population is naturally immune and would not get sick if exposed to the germ.

Who is at risk for HD?

Persons at greatest risk for HD are family members or household contacts of a case who is not receiving treatment.

Most cases in the United States occur in immigrants and refugees who acquired the disease in their native country. HD is more common in temperate, tropical, and subtropical climates, with the largest number of cases in Southeast Asia and Central Africa. In the United States, most cases are detected in residents of Texas, Louisiana, Florida, New York, Hawaii, and Puerto Rico.

How do I know if I have HD?

Your health care provider can diagnose HD by a biopsy of the skin showing a rash. A small sample of skin will be collected and sent to laboratory to see if the bacterium that causes HD can be detected.

How is HD treated?

The best way to prevent the spread of HD is early diagnosis and treatment of people who are infected. HD is treated with multiple antibiotics taken for a period of six months to two years. Usually, the infected person will become non-infectious within a few days or weeks of beginning treatment.

How is HD prevented?

Preventive antibiotics for close contacts are not recommended; however, current household contacts should be examined immediately by a health care provider and then annually for five years following last contact with the infectious patient.

There is no vaccine available to prevent HD.

All information presented is intended for public use. For more information, please refer to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website on HD:
http://www.cdc.gov/nczved/divisions/dfbmd/diseases/hansens_disease/technical.html/

This page was last reviewed June 13, 2014.